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ABSTRACT

Everyone experiences disadvantages in life. Some disadvantages are the result of forces largely beyond the control of any one individual, including genetic, political, social, and historical disadvantages which no amount of trying is apt to overcome. Some disadvantages are self-inflicted, including being deliberately narrow in viewpoint; avoiding anything that is "second-rate" (every writer compared to Homer and Shakespeare is second-rate); and not allowing oneself to be alive to the difficult, the unfamiliar, and the contradictory. A third kind of disadvantage is imposed on an individual by others who exercise control. Those exercising control are themselves individuals who can be influenced to change their minds, however. Recognizing this, it is possible to work to change policies which put one at a disadvantage, replacing them with more advantageous behaviors and attitudes. (TJ)

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PING-PONG AND THE DISADVANTAGED

Several years ago I played a series of Ping-Pong games with my son, who is now sixteen. At that time he had problems simply holding the paddle correctly, and I could win with no trouble. As a result, I usually "spotted" him several points, up to half the number required to win. He was not particularly happy with the arrangement and was always aware of what he had actually scored. He had virtually no control over his growth pattern at that awkward stage. Consequently, he caused himself some mental problems, resulting in "I-can't-do-it" attitudes. Although he struggled desperately with what nature was doing to him, although he was often self-defeating, he fought belligerently to keep me from winning. Similarly, in determining who is disadvantaged, one finds many who must live with nature's inevitabilities, many who create disadvantages for themselves, and many who struggle with disadvantages imposed by others.

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I suggest, at the outset, that many disadvantages are natural matters resulting from the disinterest of the universe, if you will. These disadvantages, if that be the correct term, concern factors over which an individual has virtually no control, even as my son could not control the paddle. Instead, these disadvantages result from large forces--whether genetic, social, political, or historical--which engulf and carry along not only one individual but a myriad. No manner of trying is likely to alter the power of these influences over the individual concerned, any more than my young son could <u>will</u> himself coordinated.

One is at a disadvantage if born with one set of genes and not with others of a more desirable nature. But one can neither care enough nor try enough to do anything significant about many things that he inherits. One cannot by the force of will endow himself with a third arm--although it might be useful to teachers for grading, or to students for writing. One cannot by the force of any inner strength increase his innate ability. He may, of course, increase his ability to take tests that are supposed to reveal native intelligence: I grant that one might through diligence raise his formally measured intelligence quotient a few points. To say, however, that one can increase his innate ability is to say that he can make himself more than he is. For those who would disagree, one must ask, "Why have you stopped where you are?" One cannot, as a man, make himself something he is not, whether an octopus or a god.

Educators must face the fact that students, like other real people, live with disadvantages they cannot significantly change: a certain color; a massive economic structure, an awesome technology that delightfully seduces, but seduces still; social lines that many an individual can have no realistic hope of crossing. These situations can be controlled as easily as one can hold the wind in a net. Perhaps Hume said it most succinctly in suggesting

that one could be aware of his innate limitations by opening his eyes and willing himself to see nothing.

In addition to the many natural disadvantages one may find, a large number of self-inflicted disadvantages may be discovered in people. These disadvantages are chosen, deliberately selected, much as my son chose to feel mistreated when he lost a game. Because they are matters of choice, these disadvantages may be overcome, replaced just as consciously and deliberately with more advantageous behavior and attitudes. Self-inflicted disadvantages are almost altogether matters of attitudes, attitudes that affect one's view of the universe, including the classroom, and his place in it. The Eighteenth Century English empiricists may have something to suggest in this regard. Bishop Berkeley declared esse est percipi: that is, to be is to be perceived. Nothing exists for anyone, he would say, without some sort of sensory experience that brings a "thing" into consciousness. Many students have deliberately set their sensory experience and rational conscousness in directions largely contrary to all the traditions of liberal education, forbidding themselves to perceive things they do not want to recognize. For them, these things do not exist.

These students, with their self-inflicted disadvantages of attitude include, for instance, many who are deliberately narrow in viewpoint. They have no use for anything not experienced by the age of twenty. They isolate themselves from unfamiliar sensory experiences. Whether these students choose Bach or Willie Nelson is really beside the point unless they are at least willing to give both an opportunity. Too many sneer cynically at any event outside their own experience, for fear of enjoying something they are not supposed to enjoy, or learning something they fear knowing. So one wonders what hope exists for the development of Renaissance men from such attitudes. As long as modern man is afraid to be eclectic--a large part of

the meaning of "Renaissance"--he will continue to be narrow, seeing only one or two colors of life's fantastic kaleidescope. Certain philosophers have argued whether a given shade of blue in the color wheel could be imagined if one had seen only the shades of blue on either side of the unfamiliar blue. The answer is still in doubt, but there is little assurance of discovering the answer if one deliberately shrugs off the question. Many students have similarly chosen not to be interested in things about which they have only peripheral knowledge at best, the equivalent of saying, "I don't know anything about this, but I know I don't want to know about it."

Still others, deliberately choose to cut loose anything that is second-rate. We often call such people "elitists." I am an elitist too, I suppose, if an "elitist" is one who believes that everything should be as good as it possibly can. But I am not an elitist if it means that no one but the very best should have a chance. I am emphatically in favor of the second-rate. Except for a very small handful of men and women who may still manage to be the very best in their fields, most people are at best second-rate. When de Maupassant was asked how he rated himself as an author, he replied emphatically that he was quite firmly in the second row--right behind Shakespeare and Homer . If he is second-rate, where does that leave all of the other poor clods? If only the elite are allowed an interest in the humanities, who will serve as their audience or spread their gospel? A truly disadvantaged man, teacher or student, is one who draws a narrow cirlce around himself, leaving out all who are not of the "elect."

I am reminded of a very religious man who tried to be holy and to separate himself from evil: he took "communion" by himself. He and others who cannot accept anything but what they consider acceptable, as well as educated people who cannot accept that which is different, or not quite up to par, are disadvantaged.

In the words of Bink Noll, such people are "dead to fondness and paradox": "dead to fondness" when they do not allow themselves to feel, when they are deliberately insensitive; "dead to paradox" when they will not allow their minds to b e stirred by the difficult, the unfamiliar, the contradictory. Perhaps Mill was right when he suggested that people prefer order to liberty. Narrow people, whether students or teachers, choose the careful, the controllable, the familiar--rather than adventure and question. Nothing, by the way, can do more for you than sudden, unexpected intellectual fear, an instant's terror that all you hold precious may be a crock of crackers. These disadvantaged are those who have no desire to be more than they are, who cannot imagine anything anymore desirable than what they are, as teacher or student.

While many disadvantages are self-inflicted and many, as we have just seen, are imposed by great forces largely beyond the control of any one individual; still another kind of disadvantage is often present. This third type of disadvantage is, like the first, imposed from without the individual, even as I imposed myself upon my son's Ping-Pong game. It is, however, a disadvantage imposed by forces that do not transcend a given individual. Although great power may be present, these disadvantages are those forced upon others by some individual or group of individuals exercising control. Their views and decisions can become disadvantage for others. These powerful individuals themselves are, however, subject to influences and powers.

To illustrate: Recently in a small meeting where I work a group of deans and chairmen were arguing some fine point of "college philosophy." Some suggested that the college had a particular philosophy, probably toward overloads. Others declared that the college had no philosophy, only individuals, albeit in power positions, who had certain attitudes and who made certain decisions. I suggest, therefore, that one is at a disadvantage when he refuses to see, usually from some misplaced idealism, that no organization

is an individual rational sensory body. In one sense, no organization ever exists as an entity: only thinking, feeling, reacting individuals exist. And everyone is at a disadvantage when he attempts to solve educational problems by dealing on a day-to-day basis with some amorphous, unthinking, unfeeling non-entity.

In addition, one is at a disadvantage when he deals with power structures, whether on campus or state levels, with a small-potatoes approach. To illustrate again: A recent article in the Community College Review [Libby Bar, "Save the Tiger: Strategies for Maintaining Literature Enrollments"] made several suggestions for increasing student enrollment in literature, a problem with which most English departments can sympathize. The article suggested (1) that posters be placed around the campus, (2) that the campus newspaper feature the English department, (3) that courses such as "Speculative Fiction" include both Swift and Star Trek. Although an admirable motive is present in such suggestions, they are an effort to extinguish a forest fire with a perfume atomizer. The problem is one that comes from without English teachers and their courses. And the problem is not a mere "sign of the times." The problem concerns the attitudes of those in power; true enough, those attitudes may be somewhat shaped by the times. Literature enrollments are down, however, because somebody decided, for instance, that they should no longer be required courses, although one could venture that no English department ever deliberately proposed that change.

These changes in requirements reflect a shift, not necessarily in society, but in administrative attitudes toward society and its literary needs. The change, moreover, reflects some individual's attitude; his philosophy has become the college's. All one has to do (although "all" sounds deceptively simple), is to change his mind.

The attitudes of these powers have little to do with the value of course content, in most cases. Many administrators do not have a very specific idea of what occurs in any English class--anymore than English teachers do about calculus classes. One can grow out of his small-potatoes approach when he grows less apologetic about the content of English courses, and when he launches an attack on administrative and state powers that determine the position of English in the curriculum. Instead of struggling to pick up eight or ten students so that a course will make, one must, in the better interest of civilization, push the powers-that-be to approve programs that create a captive enrollment of hundreds. If other high-handed but benevolent requirements (like that for English 101) can be required, so can this one. In short, many disadvantages, like administrative disadvantages, can be dealt with rather than meekly acdepted.

To go back to my Ping-Pong-playing son: Although one must simply live with some inevitabilities, time and circumstances may change what you and I cannot alter. Although nature has made my son stronger and better-coordinated, he may never be athletic. He is not, however, as self-defeating as before, having become quite sure of himself. And he has been able to alter some external influences on him: As a result, I no longer "spot" him points.

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